

Economy highlights governor's visit to Craig



Photo by [Brian Smith](#). [Enlarge photo.](#)

Gov. John Hickenlooper listens to local business owners Wednesday at J.W. Snack's in Craig.

By [Brian Smith](#) March 9, 2011



As Gov. John Hickenlooper was getting in the back of a Colorado State Patrol car to be whisked away to his next speaking engagement Wednesday in Craig, he hit his head on a piece of metal.

The blow required a trip to The Memorial Hospital's emergency room for stitches. The incident reminded the governor of a recent, hot-button state political issue, he said.

“I just bumped my head and I said, ‘That’s no big deal,’” Hickenlooper said. “I kind of felt up to see if I could feel a bump or something and I took my hand down and it was, you know, covered in my own blood.

“It reminded me of all the cuts we have had to do with the budget.”

Hickenlooper’s quip came Wednesday night during the Craig Chamber of Commerce’s State of the County 2011 event at the Holiday Inn of Craig. The governor was the featured speaker.

Before the event, Hickenlooper visited the Boys & Girls Club of Craig, The Center of Craig to comment on economic development plans, and J.W. Snack’s to visit with local business owners.

Hickenlooper said the good care he received at TMH was an example of why businesses should be attracted to Craig and Moffat County.

“You could tell I wasn’t getting special treatment — that this is what happens in a small town,” he said. “When you are in a hard spot, people come around and help you out.

“I will tell that story at least 100 times.”

Much of the governor’s speech to the more than 250 people who attended State of the County centered on the state’s budget and future.

The bottom line, Hickenlooper said, is “there are no easy solutions any more.”

“For too long ... we haven’t been willing to face up to the tough questions that need to be asked,” he said. “We just try to raid reserve funds and borrow against tomorrow and what we have done is say, ‘Alright, if our revenues have dropped like this, and they have, you know, how do we go about it in a thoughtful way trying to find savings wherever we can and prioritize if we are going to have to make cuts ... so we do as little damage as possible so when the economy comes back, we can repurpose that money quickly?’”

Hickenlooper also spoke about education cuts recommended in his proposed budget.

He said 42 percent of the state’s general fund is allocated for K-12 education and when having to cut \$600 million, it would naturally take a “big chunk out of education.”

“When you sit down with it, no matter how much you love education, you say, ‘Alright, we are going to have to do this to get through what needs to be gotten through,’” he said.

He also spoke about balancing the state’s budget to cover the needs of residents.

“I was in every county over the last year when I was running for governor,” he said. “There is no appetite to raise taxes. In this economy, people aren’t going to vote for a tax increase, so we have got a couple choices.”

Among those choices, other than the cuts, he said, was finding efficiencies and savings in state government. He noted it couldn’t stop there and cuts need to be made year after year.

But, there might be other ways to help, he said.

“So, all the efficiencies that we can imagine aren’t going to solve us out of this and if the people are not willing to increase taxes, the only real other thing that we can do I know is change the culture of our state,” he said. “By that I mean tell everyone throughout the whole state to be more pro-business.”

Hickenlooper also addressed natural resources. He said the state should “hold ourselves to the highest standards of protecting our lands and waters.”

The governor also mentioned the ongoing work of county officials across the state to develop a bottom-up economic development plan.

“What we are trying to do, and I don’t think any other state has ever done it, is you don’t want a small group of people in Denver telling the rest of the state what’s good for it,” he said.

Hickenlooper closed his speech with a story about how he came to Northwest Colorado during his gubernatorial campaign.

During the trip, he said he became the “ultimate convert” to the belief that the “ultimate strength of this state is the diversity of people and the incredible resiliency and strength in our rural areas.”

“We need to figure out how to harness and harvest that talent — the experiences and the resolve, the judgment, the ideas that are out here in every corner of the state,” he said.

Over the next few years, he said, “We have a chance to really redefine Colorado as different from almost every other state there is.”

“And a place where we are willing to put aside what your business is, what you do for a living, put aside whether you are a Republican or a Democrat, but really step up and say, ‘Alright, we are going to move this state forward in a very, very powerful way,’” he said.